DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 237 771 CE 037 833

AUTHOR Oliver, Leonard P.; Feldmann, Ann, Ed.
TITLE The Art of Citizenship: Public Issue Forums.
INSTITUTION Charles F. Kettering Foundation, Dayton, Ohio.
PUB DATE 83
NOTE 47p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Citizen Participation; *Citizenship; Citizenship Education; Citizenship Responsibility; Comparative Analysis; *Discussion Groups; Futures (of Society); Participative Decision Making; Policy Formation; *Political Issues; Postsecondary Education; Program Content; Program Development; Program Implementation; *Public Affairs Education; Public Policy; Social Action; State of the Art Reviews
IDENTIFIERS *Public Issue Forums; *United States

ABSTRACT

This study examines past and present public issue forums and their role in the United States political system. The first chapter describes traditional forms of the public forum such as town meetings, neighborhood societies, lyceums, university extension programs, and settlement house networks. Analyzed next are the content, organization, and effectiveness of the following modern forum movements: The Studebaker Forums (1932-40); the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Schools of Philosophy and Farmer Discussion Forums (1935-40); the Foreign Policy Associates Great Decisions Program (1955-present); the National Endowment for the Humanities Bicentennial American Issues Forum (1975-76); the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges' National Energy Forum (1980); the Twin Cities Citizens League (1952-present); and Swedish Study Circles (1903-present). Various lessons to be learned from the case studies are covered, including issues raised by the case studies (an overriding sense of mission, centralized versus decentralized management, timing of the program, local sponsorship, use of national organizations, issue selection, materials, use of media, leadership training, formats for discussions, getting beyond the typical forum audience, and citizen response); the Swedish study circles and the American context; and future public forum movements. The final chapter deals with the Domestic Policy Association, the United States' newest national issues forum. (MN)

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The Art of Citizenship:

Public Issue Forums

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Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the insights and editing skills provided to this project by Dr. David A. Grimsted, associate professor of history, University of Maryland. The Kettering Foundation generously offered support for the research stage of the study.

Editor: Ann Feldmann
Art Director: George T. Cavanaugh
Production Manager: Emmat Frauman
Publisher: Robert E. Daley

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The Art of Citizenship: Public Issue Forums

by
Leonard P. Oliver

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Foreword

David Mathews, President
Kettering Foundation

Late in 1982, just as the first National Issues Forum sponsored by the Domestic Policy Association was ending, Dr. Leonard P. Oliver, then special assistant to the chairman at the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), volunteered to develop some ideas related to the evolution of the public forum concept and practice in the United States. Oliver, in his official capacity at NEH, had long been instrumental in developing public issue discussion programs under Endowment auspices. We at the Kettering Foundation thought it would be useful to have such a study, particularly as the DPA's National Issues Forum program had just been launched.

After he left the Endowment in January, 1983, Oliver devoted substantial time under contract with the Foundation to research the various attempts to create public forum movements that have arisen from time to time in our history. These movements, as he points out through the use of detailed case studies, took on many forms, lasted for as long as forty years and as short as one year, and encouraged great diversity in local forum sponsorship. One overseas model, the Swedish study circles, has been going on for almost a century.

The public issue discussion programs described in his study have one major fea-

ture in common. They are attempts by highly committed individuals and organizations to make democracy work more effectively through the informed, intelligent participation of those most directly affected by public policy decisions — the local citizen. The public forum movements documented and analyzed by Oliver have served to blunt the distinction, as John Dewey maintained, between thinking and action on the part of the informed participating citizen.

These public issue forums also have in common a fundamental assumption about the individual in a democratic society. They have encouraged mass participation, albeit through manageable small-group discussion, of individual citizens and policymakers from all walks of life, holding out the premise in our overly institutionalized and bureaucratic society that every adult has an important and useful contribution to make to public life beyond the voting booth. Means have to be found, if democracy is to be more than an ideal, to enable each citizen to feel needed and have his or her opinions valued, and to learn, in Merle Curti's words, "to use knowledge without fearing it."

Through the establishment of the DPA in 1982 and its subsequent growth from seventeen local convening organizations in 1982 to some eighty sites where community forums will take place in the fall of 1983, the Kettering Foundation is pleased to have played an instrumental role in bringing to life yet another public issues forum effort. The DPA National Issues Forum, now in its early years, will, it is hoped, take its place in the annals of public forum movements so aptly documented in Oliver's unique and timely study.

The Kettering Foundation, in cooperation with the DPA, is pleased to present this volume for all those citizens and organizational leaders interested in advancing the citizen-policymaker alliance.

The History of Public Forums

From America's colonial beginnings, there has been concern that the new world give broader rights and responsibilities to citizens in a way that required extension of educational opportunities for adults. As democratic political practices and ideologies took firm hold, so did concern that the populace be both educated and informed. In 1763, John Adams argued that the American colonies could be independent largely because they had an educated and civically responsible citizenry. Conversely, Americans recognized that popular sovereignty must be an empty or even destructive ideal if it existed without a populace sufficiently informed about issues it must judge. Out of this concern grew the American system of public education and the more spasmodic efforts at informal adult civic education.

Because citizen participation is central in our democratic form of government, education is needed to make consensual government work at all levels and to act as an antidote to autocratic, special-interest, or elitist authority. Thus, the rationale for citizen education through public forums in our history has been obvious to people on all sides of the American political spec-

trum, from Hamilton's good government resulting from reflection and choice to Jefferson's stress on a "free marketplace of ideas." From Tocqueville down to contemporary political statesmen, observers of the American scene have seen vital democracy as a product of civic education which alone can banish citizen apathy, selfishness, and powerlessness.

The need for a continuing process of adult civic education is so clear-cut that the central questions concern why so little is done in the United States to promote formally the desired end. After all, it is a concept as old as Plato and as fresh as the latest public hearing. And there are always obvious reasons to worry that citizen education is so paltry: low turnouts in national and especially local elections, widespread disinterest in political issues of major import, the tendency to let experts handle questions of general import, and substantial citizen skepticism about the nation's basic institutions and those who head them.

Of course, some experts argue that widespread citizen education and political participation are undesirable. Schumpeter claims, for example, that the "common man" loses his sense of reality as he gets into issues with which he has no direct link,[1] while Wilson argues that because public officials have greater information and a more acute sense of realities, public decisions should not be taken into the marketplace.[2] Still, there seems something specious in such arguments in a democratic setting. Whatever the desirability of extending the numbers of those who contribute to public decisions, obviously those who do take part should do so as intelligently as possible. The public will be involved with issues of war and peace, energy, inflation, unemployment, industrial change, social security, defense spending, and nuclear war in ways that put a high premium on that involvement's being responsibly informed.

The history of public forums as a part of civic education in the United States gives some clues about the needs, successes, and limitations of this institutional embodiment of citizenship learning in American life. Some general consideration of early movements will precede more important studies of six American movements in the last fifty years and the most successful of the public forum systems in another democracy, Sweden, in search of principles about what seems to work and why.

Early Forms of Citizen Education and Public Discussion: Colonial Period to World War I

Institutions for citizen education and participation in public life have a rich and diverse heritage in America. The *New England town meeting*, like the Congregational Church system, was one of the earliest colonial formats for the discussion and resolution of public issues. Reliance on the popular will of all church members and most adult male citizens made these institutions for directly determining local policy, encased in structures that ensured wide debate on almost all issues of importance to the community. Both institutions contributed to the harmony and unity of the community by encouraging full expression of feeling and dissatisfaction

on particular issues. It was to the town meetings, for example, that Sam Adams's "Committees of Correspondence" turned to keep channels of communication open in the pre-revolutionary period. As public forums for open discussion of community issues, the town meetings often offended elitist officialdom. William Shirley, governor of Massachusetts from 1731 to 1760, complained that a Boston town meeting might be

> called together at any time upon the Petition of ten of the meanest Inhabitants, who by their constant attendance there generally are the majority and outvote the Gentlemen, Merchants, Substantial Traders, and all the better part of the Inhabitants; to whom it is Irksome to attend at such meetings . . . .[3]

As Puritanism's strength receded, an eighteenth century minister, Cotton Mather, tried to shore up the old way by introducing throughout New England *neighborhood societies*, perhaps the earliest formal structure of neighborhood forums to discuss and solve the "disorders" in the community. The societies were free to discuss issues, people, and fraud and to recommend legislative initiatives and "proposals for furthering this society." Benjamin Franklin secularized this idea for the intellectual elite in his *Junto* in 1727 with regular weekly meetings of influential citizens who presented essays and discussed problems of civic life, the nature of citizenship and political liberty, and remediable defects in the law. This concern of Franklin later was to take the form of the American Philosophical Society.

With the establishment of an independent democratic nation, concern about adult civic education took a more modern form in Josiah Holbrook's *Lyceum Movement*. Created at the period when both free public education and universal male suffrage were being accepted, the Lyceum was the first systematic attempt to create a formalized structure for voluntary citizen education in every part of the nation. Holbrook wanted to establish "Lyceums," or adult learning centers, in every town so citizens could discuss topics of mutual interest and pool their resources for self and community improvement. By 1835, the movement included an estimated 3,000 town, 100 county, and 16 state Lyceums, all run democratically by local citizens.

The Lyceums flourished in the early 1830s and a National American Lyceum was organized in 1831. However, the movement was hurt badly by the financial panic of 1837-43, by the growing slavery controversy that was to prove unsusceptible to solution by discussion, and by increasing competition from free-enterprise lecturers and demonstrations.[4]

The basic Lyceum idea was revived after the Civil War in the Chautauqua Assembly and the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle launched by a Methodist clergyman, Reverend John Vincent, in 1874 on the shores of Lake Chautauqua in New York. He originally had in mind secular education for Sunday school teachers but came to foster a forty-year movement of popular adult education encompassing at its peak in 1895 nationwide correspondence study and 15,000 "home study circles" for group discussion of social,

economic, and political ideas and issues. Vincent wanted through education to increase informed popular influence on politics in ways that would help solve the pressing social problems of the day.[7] The commercial traveling "tent Chautauquas," illegitimate progeny of the Chautauqua Assembly, eventually became synonymous with "Chautauqua" from 1903 to 1930 and were eventually eclipsed by new mass communication (radio, movies) and transportation forms. Even so, a historian of the movement claims that Chautauqua study circles, artistic performances, and public lectures on contemporary issues helped to raise the conscience of citizens in small towns across the country and pave the way for the new ideas on social, economic, and political policy of the Progressive and New Deal periods.[8]

Other formal vehicles for public discussion of policy issues in the period grew up in the Progressive age, including *university extension* programs, transplanted from England in the 1880s. University of Wisconsin President Charles Von Hise in the early 1900s established the model for statewide programs conducted by the land-grant universities. The passage of the *Smith-Hughes Act of 1914*, authorizing the Cooperative Extension Service to promote better rural citizenship as well as better farming, for the first time provided federal government funds for discussion forums.

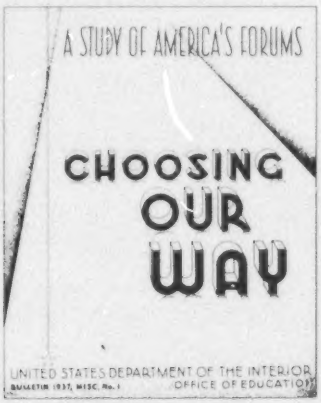
Private organizations like Jane Addams's *settlement house network* and various organizational manifestations of the progressive movement, such as women's clubs and later the League of Women Voters, advocated and aided extension of informed popular participation in government. All these efforts encouraged citizen involvement as a counterbalance to divided social classes, an increasingly urbanized society, and the problems of assimilating the new immigrants.

One open forum movement after Chautauqua took on national dimensions. In the years immediately preceding World War I, Ford Hall in Boston promoted public issue discussion using the lecture approach and was imitated across the country. Ford Hall's *Open Forum National Council* brought diverse local discussion forum efforts, some 200 organizations in all, into a national system. Most were discontinued as the country mobilized for the war, and the national forum movement collapsed. The concept did not receive substantial public attention again until the Great Depression.

Modern Forum Movements: Case Studies

National forum movements have tended to arise in periods of national unrest or when enlightened individuals saw in public issue discussion a means to make the democratic experiment work through informed citizen education and participation. The Great Depression, for example, triggered two national forum movements almost simultaneously, inspired by perceived threats to the American system. Other national forum programs arose in the post-war period, along with more localized citizen involvement programs containing aspects of citizen education. The following case studies, therefore, illustrate some of these models for organized and systematic public issue discussion. They include the two depression programs, both ultimately sponsored by the federal government: (1) The Studebaker Forums (1932-40) and (2) U.S. Department of Agriculture's "Schools of Philosophy" and Farmer Discussion Forums (1935-40). The three national post-war forums covered are: (3) Foreign Policy Association's "Great Decisions" program (1955-present), (4) National Endowment for the Human-

ities' Bicentennial American Issues Forum (1975-76), and (5) American Association of Community and Junior Colleges' National Energy Forum (1980). One metropolitan model for citizen participation is included and an ongoing foreign example: (6) Twin Cities Citizens League (1952-present) and (7) Swedish study circles (1903-present).



Case Study Number 1:
The Studebaker Forums
Summary

Description: Public issue "adult civic education" forums initiated in 1932 through the Des Moines public school system, led by Superintendent John W. Studebaker, who subsequently applied the Des Moines model nationally when he became U.S. Commissioner of Education in 1934.

Sponsor and Funding: Des Moines: Public School System, Carnegie Corporation ($125,000), American Association for Adult Education. United States: U.S. Office of Education ($744,000 in Federal Emergency Relief Funds).

Time Period: Des Moines: 1932-40. United States: 1936-40.

Results: Des Moines: Over 550 local forums annually with 13,000 annual participants (17% of the adult population). United States: 19 demonstration centers, 700 local forums, and 1 million participants annually at peak.

Context

The highly organized and widespread Studebaker forum movement arose in response to the troubled times of the Great Depression, spreading from its success in Des Moines to the national level because of Studebaker's vision and leadership. The Des Moines forum program attracted national attention with the Carnegie Corporation and the American Association for Adult Education providing support for five years, 1932-37.

Studebaker spelled out his rationale for what he called the "American Public Forum" movement in *The American Way*.[1] He argued for "communitywide adult civic education" to inform citizens about their social order by learning about and discussing vital political, economic, and social issues. Studebaker declared that "education for adult civic literacy" was the key to solving society's greatest ills by stimulating public discussion, intelligent choices, and social cooperation. The grave dangers of "fractionation of traditional community life," of special-interest groups, complex bureaucracies, increasing government power and propaganda Studebaker felt could be met by free and informed public discussion of major issues and questions.

Operations

In Des Moines, Studebaker's regularly scheduled biweekly forums, with skilled professional discussion leaders, included "neighborhood forums" in public schools, "central forums" in regions of the city, and "citywide forums" bringing in nationally known lecturers. Study guides and reading lists were handed out at each forum, school children took home forum schedules, summaries were broadcast on radio, luncheon forums were scheduled with business and professional people, and unemployed teachers conducted surveys of forum participants. For 1936, Studebaker reported in *The American Way* that over 500 forums took place, with strong press endorsement, "overflow crowds," and 17 percent of Des Moines' population participating. A typical forum participant was college-educated, 35 to 45 years old, from a relatively high socioeconomic neighborhood, and employed in a professional or highly skilled occupation.[8]

Studebaker argued forcefully for a national federally funded forum program, and in 1934, when he became U.S. Commissioner of Education, he had a chance to implement his plea for community forums across the country. In 1936, $330,000 of Federal Emergency Relief Funds went to school districts to establish demonstration centers in 10 communities. By 1937, the number expanded to 19. The centers had full-time staff and volunteer advisory boards to select issues for local discussion, raise money, and provide leadership and materials for 700 local forum structures in 42 states, sponsored by public school systems, public libraries, colleges and universities, and religious, political, and civic organizations. The total cost of the three-year program was $744,000. By 1938, "adult civic education forums" were one of the Office of Education's major program thrusts; a survey of 431 community forums in 1936-37 reported 10,451 local meetings, with 237 discussion leaders and 1 million participants (250,000 different participants).[9] Topics centered on international relations, social and economic problems, and national legislation. Typical ones were "The Supreme Court: Guardian or Gag of the Court?" "Is War Inevitable?" "Is the New Deal Socialist?" and "Can We Conquer Poverty?"

Many of the local forums charged fees or received grants or public funds. No opinion ballots or "results" on issues were tabulated. Citizen education was the end sought; what citizens did with the knowledge and skills learned was up to them. The Office of Education was upbeat about the future of the forums they had promulgated, quoting President Roosevelt who looked upon them "as meeting places for the discussion of public questions in the cities, hamlets, and on the farms throughout the length and breadth of the land."[10]

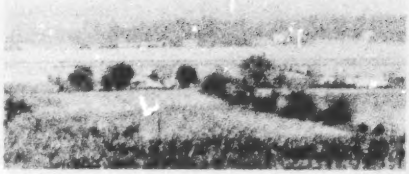
Analysis

Both the Des Moines forums and the Office of Education's national forum movement were the inspiration of one man, John W. Studebaker, who capitalized on the feelings of powerlessness and distrust in the mid-1930s depression and on the fears of dictatorship and propaganda from abroad. Both the citywide and the nationwide forums were successful, with sub-

stantial participation up to the eve of World War II. It was the first time the federal government devoted sizeable resources to a national program with the sole objective of enhancing "adult civic education." The Office of Education's "demonstration stations," modeled after the U.S. Department of Agriculture's agricultural experiment stations and staffed by senior officials who called upon leading opinion makers, were apparently effective in stimulating local forums and providing discussion leaders and materials.

Studebaker's forums, both in Des Moines and nationally, were deliberately designed *not* to result in any action. Studebaker called them "catalyzers for ideas" to enable citizens to think more deeply and critically about public issues. Their success lies in the troubled context of the 1930s when people were seeking answers, in the regularly scheduled meetings that became almost social occasions (the thing to do on Friday night), in the quality of the discussion leaders and materials, and in the community ties of local forum sponsors.

These were pre-television days, with radio and movies the main competition for the public's leisure time. Still, the forums appealed primarily to educated audiences, people who read newspapers, listened to radio, and thought about issues — according to the reports. The war brought an end to the Studebaker experiment in public discussion, and the forums failed to rebound after the war, although sporadic local efforts survived here and there.



Case Study Number 2:
Schools of Philosophy for Farmers and Farmer Discussion Groups

Summary

Description: A nationwide network of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that initiated farmer discussion groups supplemented by the establishment of "schools of philosophy" for state and county farm leadership.

Sponsor and Funding: USDA Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Division of Program Study and Discussion; cooperating with the USDA Cooperative Extension Service. Approximately $1.5 million in federal funds were expended.

Time Period: 1935-40.

Results: 70 schools of philosophy in 39 states with aggregate attendance of 14,000 Extension Service administrators and rural farm leaders and another 2 million farm people participating annually in organized discussion groups.

Context

As national agricultural policy was caught in the throes of the Great Depression, farmers grew restless about their plight, and USDA feared increased opposition to government economic and farm policies. William Allen White's oft-quoted

query from the 1890s was again raised by farmer groups: "What's the matter with Kansas? Should we raise more corn or more hell?" Thus, USDA initiated a national program of farmer discussion groups as a "democratic safety valve and a training ground in democratic methods." Undoubtedly influenced by the example and success of Studebaker's open-forum movement, the USDA, working through farm organizations, wanted "to stimulate . . . more thinking . . . [on] the broader implications of the national agricultural program."[1]

To implement its program, USDA developed a more formal project for training as discussion leaders state and county extension workers, agents, and 4-H club leaders. These training programs often lasted for several days, addressed broad phases of the national agricultural program, and soon became known as "schools of philosophy." Both of these programs flourished for several years, with USDA providing the materials, manpower, and funding — until World War II intervened.

Operations

The USDA, in designing and promoting its national forum program and schools of philosophy for farmers, worked through its national offices and existing networks of field representatives from the Extension Service. The department could also call on previously organized groups of farmers; every rural community had an elected local and county committee of farmers to administer the Agricultural Adjustment Administration programs. This pool of 40,000 farm committeemen became the center of the effort and frequently provided the basis for the discussion groups.

The Farmer Discussion Forums. — The issues addressed by the farmer forums, many of which took place in farm homes, ranged far beyond agricultural policy — taking on basic questions of the economic system, government control, and the role of the citizen. In 37 states, the state extension director appointed a state discussion group leader, who, in cooperation with county agents, organized four-day sessions of demonstrations and leadership conferences to train discussion leaders among farm people. These 40 to 50 discussion leaders then returned to their local communities to organize local forums. A sizeable number of the 40,000 farmer committeemen participated annually, many as discussion leaders, with 2 million farmers and their families directly reached in the farmer discussion programs.

The USDA issued a half dozen "methods pamphlets" telling farmers how to organize and conduct a discussion group and some 18 subject-matter pamphlets, 2 million of which were distributed over the period of five years. USDA pointed out, "The discussion pamphlets are frankly controversial, presenting contrary points of view in conversational form, and they include bibliographies of other free or inexpensive pamphlets on the same subjects."[2] Some local forums conducted their own research on issues as they affected their communities. Others linked up with national conferences on rural policy or with the nationally broadcast "Farm and Home Hour."

The "Schools of Philosophy" for

Farmers. — The schools of philosophy were attended at first by extension workers and then expanded to include farm leaders and farm committeemen, state agricultural department staff, and eventually agricultural teachers, professionals, and businessmen in small towns. They were really residential learning experiences and often tied in with the farmer discussion leader training programs for local forums. They were designed to make the farmers think about social, political, and economic policy issues beyond immediate agricultural and technical concerns.

The training schools used the lecture-discussion format, with topics worked out jointly between USDA and state extension officials, and critics of agricultural policy were often invited to present their views. At first, the USDA established four-day sessions for the schools in states that requested them; eventually they were operating in 39 states, with some national and regional schools. By 1940, there were 70 such schools in operation with an aggregate attendance of 14,000 farm leaders annually.

Analysis

More than three-fourths of the states had farmer discussion programs and schools of philosophy in the period 1935-40, operating mainly through the state and county extension offices. Participants in both the schools of philosophy and the farmer discussion forums were advised by USDA to avoid action or planning outcomes and the influence which agencies and organizations interested in social action might bring to bear on the forums. The emphasis was on critical and reflective thinking, not on direct results. For this reason, some critics of the program saw the discussions as pointless, while supporters hailed the two programs as ways to upgrade farmer education through informed public discussion. The USDA summarized the program in 1940:

> . . . if a democracy rests in the last analysis on "confidence in the judgment of the common man," as Thomas Mann expressed it, then democracies need to be interested not only in implementing that judgment by holding elections, but also in encouraging and developing the free discussion of public policy. . . . The citizen in a democracy not only needs to learn how to vote intelligently . . . , but he also needs to learn how to participate intelligently in the administrative activities of his government.[13]

By 1940, USDA organizers were calling for ways to channel forum opinions to state and national authorities. After the war, the elaborate structure for farmer discussion forums and schools of philosophy was not revitalized, although local discussion programs and citizen education remained on the agenda of the USDA's Cooperative Extension Service.

During wars, a patriotic national consensus emerges obliterating regional, ideological, and economic-social differences among the people. During World War II, America's resources were mobilized in support of the straightforward task of winning the war, and, except for national radio programs like the "Town Meeting of the Air," no one saw the need for national discussion of public issues. In the post-war period, there was some desire to forget about social problems in readjusting to a civilian economy. The Studebaker and USDA farmer forums were lost in the shuffle. In the early 1950s, however, the cold war, nuclear proliferation, the Korean War, and the hysteria of the McCarthy era all caused intense concern about foreign relations, out of which a new national discussion program on foreign policy arose.

Case Study Number 3:
The Foreign Policy Association's "Great Decisions" Program
Summary

Description: The Foreign Policy Association (FPA), founded in 1918, created the Great Decisions program in 1955 to encourage citizen discussion of foreign policy issues. Great Decisions selects eight issues annually, sells the texts for these issues to local sponsors, and tabulates and reports on the opinion ballots on the issues submitted by participants.

Sponsor and Funding: Funding for FPA and Great Decisions comes from foundations (39%), corporations (14%), individuals (10%), and income from services and materials (37%). FPA's annual budget is approximately $2 million.

Time Period: 1955-present. Annual Great Decisions programs take place in February-March.

Results: 150,000 adults participate annually in Great Decisions discussion programs in 800 communities. The program text is carried in 407 newspapers, and 314 radio and 153 television stations develop programs on the issues. Some 60,000 opinion ballots are tabulated annually and the results shared with policymakers and opinion leaders.

Context

The FPA, founded in 1918 to generate citizen support for the League of Nations, is the oldest and largest national organization concerned with world affairs education. FPA ceased to be a membership organization in 1957 and today primarily produces educational materials on foreign policy issues and conducts special seminars for civic, business, and professional leaders as well as representatives of Congress and the United Nations. Its publications include its *Headline Series* providing rich coverage of a single foreign policy issue and *Great Decisions* texts distributed to local discussion groups (100,000 were sold in 1982). FPA also provides special *Foreign Policy Briefs* for distribution at national election time to present oppos-

Wallace Irwin, Jr., former editor of the Foreign Policy Association, was moderator at this Great Decisions discussion group meeting at the YWCA of the city of New York in 1983.

ing views on key foreign policy topics.

The Great Decisions program arose in the aftermath of the Korean War, the ambiguous outcome of which suggested the increased complexities in foreign relations in the nuclear age. FPA's reputation as a "fact dispensary" was well-established when, in 1954, it saw a need for an informed and effective citizen voice in foreign affairs. In early 1955, FPA cooperated with the Oregon State University Extension Service in a series of eight weekly small-group discussion programs called Great Decisions, locally sponsored by religious, civic, and educational organizations with FPA providing brief, up-to-date fact sheets along with guides on organizing discussion groups. Participants were invited to complete post-discussion opinion ballots and mail them to their representatives in Washington. The experiment attracted several hundred discussion participants, and local media, schools, and libraries supported it.[1]

Operations

The elements of the original Oregon experiment remain key to the success of Great Decisions today—twenty-nine years later. The issues are chosen in the early summer of each year in consultation with local Great Decisions coordinators and foreign policy experts. Occasionally, coordinators' conferences are held in the fall. The textbooklet, a discussion leader's guide, a teacher's guide, and a bibliography are sold to subscribers beginning in early January.

Local sponsors for the February-March discussions include the 70 World Affairs Councils loosely affiliated with the FPA and a wide range of groups sponsored by university extension, women's clubs, civic associations, business firms, labor unions, community centers, senior centers, reli-

gious organizations, libraries, and public schools' adult education departments. These organizations represent the spectrum of community life and are largely the same as those who sponsored the Studebaker forums of the 1930s.

Materials are also sent to newspapers and television and radio stations, while many sponsoring groups arrange for their own local media coverage. National Public Radio and public television stations have devoted air time to exploration of the issues, and the *Christian Science Monitor* runs a series of eight double-page articles, one on each topic, each Friday in February and March. The topics are current and often recurring.

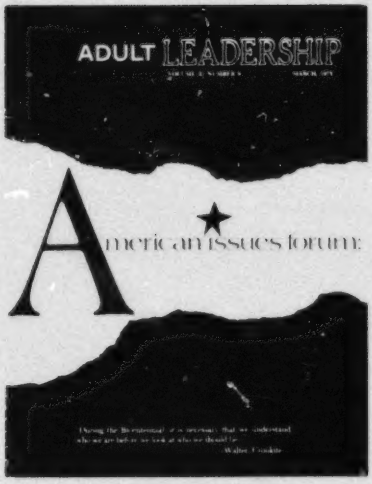
The 1983 discussions involved 150,000 local participants, and 70,000 opinion ballots were submitted, with the results forwarded to Congress, the State Department, and key presidential advisors. The results are usually entered into the *Congressional Record*, and occasionally hearings are held on analyses of the balloting.

Analysis

Unlike most earlier forum programs, Great Decisions has had a remarkably long run and shows no sign of faltering. The program has grown steadily, with some falling off in the Vietnam period, and it continues to attract new community sponsors and adult participants.

It has managed to remain contemporary and vital for several reasons: the timeliness and importance of its issues, the high quality and low cost of its materials, its nonpartisan approach, its established network of enthusiastic local sponsors, its openness to new, self-starting sponsors, and the opportunity it affords for citizens to express their views, knowing that their opinions in the aggregate will receive a hearing at the highest policy levels of government.

Attendants are varied but do not reflect a cross-section of the population. For example, in 1982, 50 percent of the participants were over sixty-one years of age, two-thirds were women, and almost 90 percent had some college experience and one-third held advanced degrees (65% of the participants said they were asked their opinion on foreign policy matters "often" or "sometimes," and 44% admitted they changed their opinions in a significant way as a result of participation in the Great Decisions program). These results are not dissimilar to the audience profile that emerged from the Studebaker forums almost half a century earlier.



In the early 1960s, the nation's concerns with social inequality, the civil rights movement, and then the Vietnam War were debated in the media, primarily television, and in spontaneous and often ad hoc "teach-ins," mass rallies, and workshops in all parts of the country. The 1960s were a time for social action, not reflection and discussion; for distrust of political leadership, not acceptance of public pronouncements; and for widespread polarization on public issues. Anyone who wanted to inject an element of dispassionate rationality and nonpartisan public discussion into the volatility of the issues, particularly in the mid- and late 1960s and early 1970s would have been ignored. Subsequently, the Watergate affair awakened national interest and debate on issues of ethics in government, constitutionality, the powers of the president, and the role of the press in governmental affairs, but these debates again were primarily conducted through the media and in college classrooms, not in any systematic or organized national public issue forums.

By the early 1970s, the National Endowment for the Humanities, then only six years old, began a national state-based program which by 1974 would be operational in all 50 states. State volunteer committees focused their funding exclusively on public discussions of public policy issues, bringing for the first time community residents into dialogue with academic scholars in the humanities in a nationwide program.

The Bicentennial of 1976 provided the Endowment with a convenient context for creating the American Issues Forum (Case Study Number 4), a heavily funded national issues program reaching into all sections of the country. Immediately following this one-year program, the Endowment supported an experimental national "single-issue" program of public discussion on energy, sponsored by the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges through its member institutions (Case Study Number 5).

Case Study Number 4:
The American Issues Forum
Summary

Description: A national public discussion program during the Bicentennial which attempted to involve a broad segment of the American public in discussion of 9 monthly and 36 weekly topics in a "Calendar of Issues." Topics related to the American

people, culture, and political and social institutions.

Sponsor and Funding: The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), in cooperation with its state humanities network, supported the AIF with $9 million in contracts and grants over a two-year period, supplemented by $1.7 million in corporate and foundation contributions.

Time Period: Planning for AIF began in late 1973, and the national program took place from September, 1975, to May, 1976, followed by a one-year nationwide field study.

Results: NEH was able to document 1,000 regional, state, and community forums with diverse local sponsors, a national public television series, a National Public Radio series, a Course-by-Newspaper supplement, and an estimated direct participation of 100,000 adults in discussion programs.

Context

Following the uncertainties of a divisive decade, climaxed by the Watergate scandal and the resignation of a president, the country seemed ready to reflect on its two-hundred years. The existence of a definite termination date for the Bicentennial served to give impetus and a sense of urgency to the effort. NEH, with a growing budget and under considerable congressional pressure to expand its public activities, was able to increase its national recognition and broaden its nonacademic standing and constituency through the development of the AIF.

Operations

NEH published a "Calendar of Issues" for AIF which covered a nine-month period. It was distributed to 225,000 organizations and individuals representing the spectrum of American political-social-civic life. NEH staff aggressively promoted AIF in the media to state and local organizations. State humanities councils assisted with local grant making, and NEH, through its regular grant-making channels, funded national youth debates; television, radio, and newspaper programs; a major publication series on the monthly topics with national organizations; a regional center; and four experimental urban humanities programs. Many of the AIF materials were published in Spanish.

NEH created a central office for the AIF and at one point had an active mailing list of 25,000 names. A promotional film with Walter Cronkite as narrator, a national Advertising Council campaign, 22,000 adult and youth reading lists on the AIF topics, and materials in braille for the blind were among the AIF promotional and informational materials.

Analysis

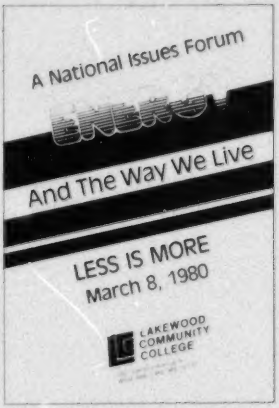
NEH devoted $9 million to AIF in two years and generated almost $2 million in additional private-sector support. In a nationwide field study on AIF, NEH was able to document 1,000 spontaneously initiated forums at the local and state level.[15] Through AIF, NEH was also able for the first time to develop cooperative programs with major national organizations. It encouraged these organizations to contribute their views on the monthly issues, and or-

ganizations such as the AFL-CIO, the NAACP, the Urban League, the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs, the National Federation for the Blind, and the National Council on the Aging subsequently reached millions of their members with AIF-related publications.

In one of the most dramatic experiments for NEH, the city of San Francisco developed a nine-month, citywide AIF program which provided several AIF events daily — exhibits, brown-bag luncheon discussions, public forums at branch libraries, radio/TV discussions, and Sunday morning study hours — all related to the AIF topics and reaching 1 of 5 citizens during the period.

Further, NEH was able to use its national position and extensive resources to extend the concept of public issue discussion into every state, to raise significant public issues for public consideration, and to serve as a catalyst for a wide range of local forum experiments — including statewide and citywide television forums with community "listening posts"; state library programs bringing in small-town branches; numerous weekly forums by civic clubs, colleges and universities, and labor organizations; links between NEH-funded radio, TV, and newspaper programs and local forums, many of which were conducted in homes; and forums in prisons, senior centers, and local churches.

In retrospect, AIF could have used more lead time in planning, a shortened "calendar" period, better promotion, and enhanced quality and consistency in its materials. Overall, AIF was "a noble but imperfect idea," and the only national Bicentennial program which lent intellectual purpose to the celebration.



Case Study Number 5: The American Association of Community and Junior Colleges' National Energy Forum

Summary

Description: A national public discussion program on the energy issue, with a ten-week "calendar of issues," conducted through the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges' (AACJC) national office and through regional centers and local community colleges.

Sponsor and Funding: NEH provided a grant of $550,000 to AACJC for the National Energy Forum, supplemented by $100,000 from the Department of Energy, $150,000 from various foundations and corporations, and another $1 million in state and local donations for the community forums.

Time Period: The National Energy Forum took place from February to April, 1980, with an eighteen-month planning period.

Results: AACJC reported 1,205 forums in 48 states, with 400 regional and local coordinating community colleges attracting 100,000 adult participants in the forums and another 9.4 million viewers and readers for special television, radio, and newspaper contributions to the national program.

Context

The National Energy Forum was a follow-up by NEH to the Bicentennial AIF program, capitalizing on the administration's overriding concern with the energy issue and the interest of the AACJC leadership in the community forum concept. For example, after the AIF, NEH experimented in 1976-77 with a citywide Course-by-Newspaper-based forum program in San Francisco, and then in 1977-78 provided AACJC with funds for developing regional public forum demonstration programs centered on the Course-by-Newspaper and reaching eventually 600 community colleges through 11 demonstration centers.

Building upon these experiments, NEH agreed to accept a proposal from the AACJC to undertake a major national series of open forums on "Energy and the Way We Live."

Operations

AACJC decided to concentrate its public forum program on the single issue of energy, approached from perspectives offered by the humanities and concentrated into a ten-week period. In setting up the program, AACJC gained the support of national membership organizations representing the state humanities councils, museums and libraries, minority, religious, and environmental groups, as well as the Course-by-Newspaper, National Public Radio, and WTBS-TV in Atlanta.

In a national competition, AACJC made grants to coordinating community colleges in 10 regions of the country, which in turn appointed their own regional Energy Forum Steering Committees (similar to Studebaker's demonstration centers and their advisory bodies). AACJC also created a strong central office, distributed a series of high-quality documents, including promotional materials, to the regional coordinating colleges and to local forum sponsors on request, and created a national nine-hour telethon through WTBS in Atlanta and seven one-half hour documentaries on National Public Radio.

Community colleges conducting forums on the local level enlisted the support and endorsement of community leaders and organizations; made extensive use of newspaper, radio, and television; held training sessions for forum moderators; and developed supplementary activities such as library exhibits, film series, and museum and mall displays and festivals — all linked to the National Energy Forum's themes.

Analysis

The statistics on the National Energy Forum are impressive[16]: 1,205 forums initiated by 400 community colleges (each community college committed itself to mounting three local forums); community

forums in 48 states with 100,000 adult participants; 9.4 million reached by the television, radio, and newspaper programs; and 29,000 questionnaires returned from the local forums. The profile that emerges from these returns shows that the vast majority of participants were under forty-nine years of age and that 58 percent were male. Similar to other national forums where such data have been collected, 82 percent had some college experience. Overwhelmingly high percentages of participants thought the forums fair in their presentations (87%), created a better understanding of the issues (87%), changed their opinions as a result of the forums (60%), and led to increased concern about the energy issue (92%).

In its wake, the National Energy Forum claimed that many of the local Energy Forum Steering Committees continued to be active after the national program had ended, that many community colleges would continue the series on their own, and that some community colleges planned to build in community forums as integral components of their public service activities.

Some of the local sponsoring community colleges were able to generate corporate and foundation support. They also reported strong local media support and said they would recommend that their institutions participate in future forum activities (76%). No data are available on the number of community colleges which have institutionalized the community forum process. Without the stimulus provided by a central office and ready-made materials, it is doubtful that many community colleges continued their forum programs given scarce resources for this type of public service and other institutional priorities.

What is clear, however, is that using a defined network of community-based and established institutions seems to be an effective vehicle for conducting a coordinated national forum program on policy issues.

The Onondaga Citizens League
Citizens League nonpartisan public affairs research and education in the St. Paul Minneapolis metropolitan area 84 S. 6th St., Minneapolis, Mn. 55402 (612) 338-0791
JACKSONVILLE COMMUNITY COUNCIL INC.

Metropolitan or regional citizens leagues are effective devices for citizen research and education on pressing policy issues and hold the potential for serving as catalysts for open public forums — locally and nationally. The following case study emphasizes the Citizens League, Minneapolis-St. Paul, but also refers to the Jacksonville (Florida) Community Council and the Onondaga (Syracuse) Citizens League.

Case Study Number 6: Citizens Leagues

Summary

Description: The citizens leagues are nonpartisan, nonprofit, incorporated regional membership organizations which identify important policy issues, analyze them, discuss their findings with members and the public, and submit recommendations to policymakers.

Sponsors and Funding:

1. *Citizens League, Minneapolis-St. Paul*: 3,000 members pay $20 annual dues (18% of budget); 400 firms pay $100-$15,000 (78% of budget); and the balance comes from grants and contracts.

2. *Jacksonville Community Council*: 500 members pay $10 annually and make contributions (20% of budget); other income comes from United Way (42.5% of budget), the city of Jacksonville (13.6% of budget), and corporate and foundation grants and contracts (23.8% of budget).

3. *Onondaga Citizens League*: 125 members pay $15 annually with sponsors paying $30; the Continuing Education Center for the Public Service, University College, Syracuse University, provides administrative support.

Time Period: Citizens League, Minneapolis-St. Paul: 1952- present.

Jacksonville Community Council: 1975-present.

Onondaga Citizens League: 1978-present.

Results: The citizens leagues enlist volunteer citizen study groups to investigate and debate policy issues and make recommendations for action. The resulting reports are discussed in public forums and submitted to policymakers. They issue from one to six or more reports annually and have won high praise for affecting the course of local policy decisions.

Context

There are citizens leagues in a number of metropolitan or regional areas; the three examples presented here were chosen as prototypes because of their varying life spans and similarity of functions.

The *Twin Cities Area Citizens League* was formed in1952 to involve citizens in

the improvement of the structure and processes of government. It was formed in the general mold of long-standing urban civic-reform or governmental research organizations, and it arose from a new generation of civic and political leadership in Minneapolis, particularly from local business leaders who had met informally for many years over lunch at the YMCA to discuss policy issues. Local firms put up the seed money for the first three years for what quickly became a nonpartisan organization. In its early years the League sponsored public forums and publications on issues, but it turned to more direct action in 1962 when the League obtained community support for a major school replacement program, over school board opposition. Since then, the League has had the philosophy that it is a "consultant to the community," an "agenda-setting" organization obviating crisis management by providing in-depth analysis and discussion of issues and alternatives before they reach crisis levels. Over the years, the League claims its studies, recommendations, and follow-up have been responsible for initiating many progressive developments in the area — such as a new zoo, a state university for older students, a public-private sharing of medical facilities, and a master plan for center-city revitalization.

The *Jacksonville Community Council* was initiated in 1975 and uses diverse volunteer citizen study committees and task forces to provide fact finding, analysis, and recommendations on community issues. The Council's studies have included such topics as "Public Education," "Housing in Jacksonville," "Planning in Local Government," and "Downtown Derelicts." The Council calls its studies "blueprints for action" and points to numerous improvements in Jacksonville which have grown out of its studies.

The *Onondaga Citizens League* was organized by Syracuse University's Continuing Education Center for the Public Service in 1978, taking as its model the Twin Cities Area Citizens League. It grew out of the Center's most influential and longest-running community program — the Thursday Morning Roundtable, a weekly breakfast forum for 150 community leaders. A number of participants became interested in the citizens league concept, sought advice from the Citizens League in the Twin Cities, appointed an advisory board, immediately signed up 125 members, and formed its first study group. The League addresses one major issue a year such as property assessments or declining school enrollments. It works through citizen task forces drawn from its members and seeks "a regularized way of examining issues . . . before they become crises." Unlike the other citizens leagues, the Onondaga League is still too young to claim victories with policymakers.

Operations

Issue Selection. — Each league has a board of directors and staff who nominate issues to be studied after broad public consultation. In the Twin Cities, for example, the League regularly consults with community leaders, journalists, and policymakers; speakers address weekly breakfast and luncheon forums; and members are surveyed. By late winter, the League's

Program Committee compiles a list of 50 to 100 issues for study, eventually paring these down to 6 to 8 topics for the year. The Jacksonville and Onondaga leagues solicit issues for study in similar fashion.

Study Committees. — The leagues do not commission outside studies; members volunteer for the study groups on issues they want to work on. Both "generalists" and "specialists" are included, and they usually meet weekly with outside resource people over the course of three to eight months. The Twin Cities League, for example, calls in some 250 outside experts annually to appear before its study groups. The leagues all provide staff support for their study groups.

Dissemination and Implementation of Recommendations. — Each league is concerned with the broadest possible public dissemination and discussion of its reports and recommendations and the eventual integration of its findings into public policy. The Twin Cities League mails 1,500 copies of its reports to members, the public, policymakers, and the media; the study group chairmen often testify before legislative bodies; and League members monitor progress on the recommendations. The League also publicizes its reports through weekly and monthly Leadership Breakfasts, Luncheon Forums, a speakers' bureau, and intensive seminars. Jacksonville's Council appoints an "implementation task force" to market its report and recommendations, stimulate community dialogue, and work with appropriate policymakers. The Onondaga League capitalizes on its Thursday Morning Breakfast Roundtable to report its findings and begin the process of community discussion.

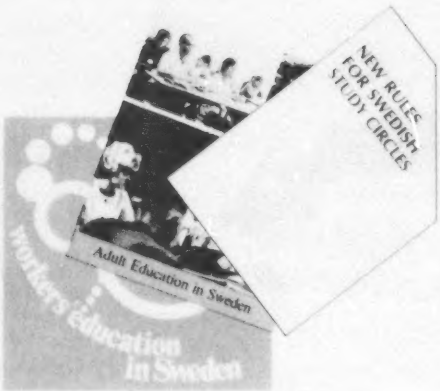
Analysis

The citizens league is not a national movement, although it functions in various forms in many metropolitan and regional areas. The citizens league concept does not fit the mold of the other case studies in that open public forums are not the primary goal. They focus on citizen education, research, and action on specific issues, even though each league examined uses public forums to communicate and implement its ideas.

The citizens leagues exemplify model citizen involvement in understanding and participation in public issues and policymaking. They have been reasonably successful in terms of the issues raised, the quality of their discussions and findings, and media and public attention. The Twin Cities and Jacksonville programs also have influenced public policy, bringing citizens directly into public governance.

The citizens leagues represent a potential for organized public discussion of national issues. They have been able to obtain widespread public and private-sector support, although like most citizen-based organizations, they struggle for diversity, tending to attract the highly educated, professional, non-minority participant. All see the need for membership expansion to wider community groups as a major priority.

Like the FPA's Great Decisions program, the Twin Cities Area Citizens League at least has shown remarkable continuity, in part because of its program of citizen research and education.



The final case study looks at an overseas phenomenon — the Swedish study circle, one of the most successful models for small-group citizen education and public issues discussion in the world. Various forms of study circles are found in many countries, perhaps reaching their highest form in Sweden and several other Scandinavian countries. The concept has been imported, and the New York State's Department of Education has experimented with some study circle models, but nothing national on the scale found in Sweden exists in the United States.

Case Study Number 7: The Swedish Study Circles

Summary

Description: Sweden's study circles, now eighty-eight years old, are a major form of informal education in that country, with one of every three adults taking part annually in small-group settings pursuing well-planned studies. Study circle issues or problem areas are determined in advance by the government, by the ten national study circle associations, and by the local study circle groups.

Sponsor and Funding: National study circle sponsors include: Workers' Educational Association, Study Association Adult School, Study Association Fellow Citizen School, Salaried Employees Educational Work, Sweden's Church Study Association, Free Church Study Association, Folk University, Temperance Movement Educational Work, Study Promotion Association, and the YWCA/YMCA Study Association. Government subsidies cover one-half the study circle costs; other income comes from municipal subsidies, participant fees, and fees from member organizations.

Time Period: 1895-present.

Results: There are approximately 275,000 study circles in Sweden enrolling more than 2 million adult participants annually in almost every community.

Context

The Swedish study circles evolved as instruments of popular education and social change at the end of the nineteenth century, under the auspices of national religious, political, and temperance groups. These national movements used the study-circle approach to help adults to understand public issues and to gain practical knowledge and skills to improve their positions in life. The home was the usual gathering place, leaders were not formally trained, and materials were limited in the early years.[17]

By World War II, the study circle had become identified with popular democracy, and most of Sweden's national movements — labor, political, temperance, religious, social-cultural — were sponsoring their own study circles. They reflected both sponsor and individual member needs and constituted Sweden's major form of adult education. After World War II, the Swedish government began offering grants for study circles, delegating this grant-making authority to ten state-approved national educational associations. The study circles expanded rapidly, doubling every ten years so that today they are "the most pervasive and innovative of all of Sweden's subsidized adult education institutions."[1]

Operations

A study circle is defined as an informal group which meets for the common pursuit of well-planned studies of a subject or problem area which has previously been decided upon. Study circles are voluntary; group leaders are more coordinators than teachers; and the subject matter includes languages, aesthetic subjects, and intellectual and social questions. At times, study circles have been asked to discuss immediate national policy issues; for example, in 1980, the Swedish government launched a study program on nuclear energy, provided materials, and asked the sponsoring national associations to arrange for their study circles to discuss the issue in what amounted to a national referendum on nuclear power. Based on the results emerging from the study circle discussions, the Swedish government reconsidered its policies to reflect the popular will.

Most study circles are initiated by the ten national associations, but any five individuals can submit a study circle plan to one of the national bodies for approval. The study circles take place in homes, community centers, libraries, churches, work sites, union halls, schools, and colleges. In order to obtain government subsidies, study circles must meet at least four study weeks and twenty meeting hours, with most meeting on the average once a week for six to twelve weeks. In recent years, cooperative publishing houses specializing in study circle materials have emerged. And increasingly, the national sponsoring associations have reported study circle opinion summaries to government policymakers.

The Swedish study circles' topics are much more varied and individually chosen than any American program. Issues may range from the purely aesthetic or intellectual to the highly ideological, depending only on group interest. What keeps the study circles open and democratic is the multiplicity of sponsors, with adult participants free to choose what interests them.

Analysis

Prime Minister Olaf Palme has noted that Sweden is "to a considerable degree a study-circle democracy." One of every three adults participates annually in study circles, which reach into every community. They are extremely diverse, and adults have a good chance of finding something that suits their interests. Because participation is so widespread, the personal and social benefits of a better-informed pop-

uface are clear. They of course are not free of problems: complaints exist of particular groups being too rigid or personal or convivial to encourage optimal discussion. Year after year, however, the degree of participation has been remarkable.

Studies have indicated that two-thirds of the study circle participants are women, 73 percent are eighteen to forty-nine years old, one-third live in small towns or rural communities, and the vast majority have had at least an elementary school or high school education.[7] Working-class participants make up the largest proportion of study circle members, and they are actively encouraged by the national trade union associations.

No American public forum program has ever involved such a high percentage of the adult population, allowed such democratic choice of topics, or attracted such a democratic cross-section of the total population as is found in each yearly Swedish study circle program.

Lessons from the Case Studies

The history of public forum movements in America is one of discontinuity. They have arisen periodically when an enlightened individual (a Holbrook, a Vincent, a Studebaker) saw a need for a new public discussion format and when the national scene provided the appropriate context for a new forum program to emerge (the Great Depression, the cold war, the Bicentennial, the concern over energy). Few have survived, yet in spite of this discontinuity, there is public support for the concept and an abstract recognition of the desirability, even necessity, for such programs. Whenever such national forums are mounted, the public has responded positively.

Still, no forum program for public issue discussion in the United States has been effective for more than about thirty years, about the life span of the Lyceum and Chautauqua movements, although Great Decisions promises to outstrip these. The Twin Cities Area Citizens League, local and different in nature, has already done so. Certainly no American national forum has approached the percentage and variety of participants who take part yearly in Sweden's almost century-old study circles.

This study has attempted to derive some principles from an examination of various

forum movements and programs to suggest elements of success and failure. All of these programs have three characteristics in common, including: (1) the importance of the issues to the public; (2) good-quality materials at low cost showing various sides or aspects to the issues; and (3) strong local sponsorship and initiative. There are also factors contributing to the lack of continuity for several of these forum programs.

The Studebaker and the USDA forum programs of the 1930s ran head on into World War II and were not revived in the post-war period. The AIF was designed to self-destruct after the Bicentennial, and the AACJC National Energy Forum was almost wholly dependent upon federal funding for a specific grant period. None of these programs had built-in mechanisms to assess participant opinions on the issues or to communicate the results to policymakers (although AACJC's questionnaire came close), and none was able to institutionalize the forum process locally. All were heavily dependent upon federal funding sources.

The two case studies of American programs that continue today also show similar characteristics, disparate as they are in scope and form. Both the Great Decisions program and the citizens leagues use some form of participant feedback to policymakers; both have managed to institutionalize their programs with substantial local sponsorship; and both are relatively independent of government support. Also, the business community is strongly supportive of both Great Decisions and the citizens leagues, thereby contributing to their long-term stability.

The case studies raise certain specific issues that should be considered in relation to the general problem of developing coordinated national open forum programs for discussion of policy issues. Since the Swedish study circles occur in a much more homogeneous society, this case study is considered separately to provide direct comparisons with our experience and sharpen our understanding of this successful model and what can be applied in the American context.

Issues Raised by the Case Studies

An Overriding Sense of Mission. — Complex national programs are held together by a set of principles, a sense of misssion, and a sense of identity throughout the network. These principles relate to the importance of the program to national and public life, to centralized national direction or decentralized local investment in the program, to the value of civic education and citizen participation in policymaking, and to citizen-policymaker communication.

Centralized or Decentralized Management. —Centralized national management of a nationwide forum program can be costly and difficult to sustain over the long term. The Studebaker and USDA forums were million dollar, multi-year programs, AIF absorbed $9 million in just two years, and the AACJC energy forums cost half a million dollars for a ten-week effort. These programs were also subject to the whims of the funding sources and the changing national political, social, and economic climate. In contrast, the primary resources

for Great Decisions come from local volunteer coordinators and local funding sources, with materials for sale and publicity provided by a national office. Citizens leagues are supported by member fees, business firms, a small number of grants, and minimum governmental support.

Timing of the Program. — The most effective programs appear to have focused time periods, as it is difficult to sustain public discussion over many months. Citizens generally show little willingness to devote more than a small part of a six- or eight-week period to concentrating on this kind of activity. A shorter period of emphasis also encourages more attention to the events by news media.

Local Sponsorship. — The Studebaker forums used public school districts as their prime sponsors but encouraged diverse community sponsorship of forums. USDA worked exclusively through state and local extension officials or farm committees — both existing networks. AACJC employed the community college network. All tied their forum programs into the ongoing work of these organizations. Great Decisions, on the other hand, has fostered great diversity in local sponsorship, although the seventy World Affairs Councils give it a degree of permanency through a ready-made base of local support. New coalitions for public policy discussion can be effective in raising institutional interest, sharing resources, and surmounting parochial interests, but sustaining and institutionalizing such coalitions can be difficult without exceptional local leadership.

Use of National Organizations. — Both the AIF and the AACJC forum programs made extensive use of national membership organization networks. Great Decisions uses endorsements from national organizations for publicity and employs their communications channels to local affiliates. Yet, national organizations can only endorse the forum idea, not ensure the local leadership and interest to sustain it. They can, however, help publicize and legitimize programs and identify activist member institutions and individuals who might successfully support local forum programs.

Issue Selection. — Most of the forum programs examined used advisory bodies or other mechanisms to shield directors from charges of bias or arbitrariness in issue selection, and all strove for balance in the presentation of the issues. The public seems to care more about the relevance, timeliness, and fairness of the issues presented than it does about who selects the issues. Most of the programs examined multiple issues, often centered around a general topic like foreign or farm policy, although AACJC's energy focus suggested a more focused approach could also be effective.

Materials. — Almost all the forum programs provided, at the minimum, a basic issues text and bibliography (usually of generally available works designed for public reading), along with a discussion leader's manual. The materials were reportedly of generally high quality, and most were free or reasonably priced. Government-subsidized materials were generally more widely distributed and permitted a broader range of participation, though Great Decisions has shown that commer-

cial publication is adaptable to public forum needs.

Use of Media. —USDA used the "Farm and Home Hour" radio program to supplement its farmer discussion groups; Great Decisions chiefly depends on national newspaper articles to highlight its issues; and AIF and AACJC both made extensive use of radio and the Course-by-Newspaper. Both failed to enlist national commercial network television, although local sponsors found greater success with local stations. Television has been called the central focusing medium of our times, but it has obvious shortcomings for public issue forums and community discussion, although satellite transmission holds promise of linking national forum programs with community-based activities.

Leadership Training. — Most of the major forum movements and programs have conducted training programs for organizing and conducting discussions. Regional demonstration and coordinating centers (Studebaker) and schools of philosophy (USDA) for leadership training were important factors in the success of the two 1930s' movements. Regional centers were also important to AACJC's energy forums. Great Decisions periodically holds coordinator conferences, but these have not proved effective except as morale boosters. In some cases the training is perhaps valuable but costly, and Great Decisions and the AIF program have shown it is not essential.

Formats for Discussion. — Both the 1930s' forum movements employed standard lecture-panel-audience discussion formats. Great Decisions local programs essentially follow the same path, occasionally adding luncheon forums, television and radio broadcasts, or newspaper supplements for discussion starters. Local sponsors for both the AIF and the AACJC programs experimented with a vast array of formats, including television and radio "listening posts" in homes and libraries; "living room dialogues"; widespread use of films, videotapes, slide shows, and multimedia presentations; breakfast discussions and noontime "brown-bag" sessions; Sunday "study hours" at local churches; and library and museum exhibits and film series. The citizens leagues use resource people and panels in their study groups. None of these techniques, however, seemed to change the central value of the programs: the stimulus of face-to-face discussion on issues of deep concern to the citizens participating.

Getting Beyond the Typical Forum Audience. — All the American forum examples used in this study primarily attracted educated, middle-class, dominantly professional white-collar audiences. Many of the participants were also older, often tended to be women, and few reported substantial participation by minorities or less educated segments of the public. There was one exception: farmers were the main participants in the USDA forums. AIF was able to attract working-class, blue-collar audiences along with some black and Hispanic participation by seeking them out; for instance, labor organizations and national organizations representing minority interests distributed their own materials offering their perspectives on the issues, and basic materials were published in

Spanish. To attract other than traditional audiences, forum issues must be germane to working-class and minority concerns, sites should be local and nonthreatening, and labor and minority sponsors need to be actively courted.

Citizen Opinion Responses. — The three public forum programs examined in this study which are still functioning have built-in mechanisms for assessing participant views on the issues discussed. Great Decisions opinion ballots on foreign policy issues are tabulated and the results shared with leading policymakers. Citizen league reports on issues are widely distributed and publicly discussed and are tied directly to political action. There is always some tension between open inquiry and direct political action, but the Great Decisions format, where citizens sense that not only are they learning but that to some degree power brokers are listening, appears to be helpful in stimulating public participation. And of course, the broader the citizen involvement in a public forum program, the greater the likelihood that the results will be taken seriously. Finally, self-selective, randomized opinion ballots can be written off easily by policymakers who disagree with the summaries; summaries that reflect regional views or the opinions of distinct segments of the population could be powerful tools to increase local participation and affect policy directions.

The Swedish Study Circles and the American Context

The success of the Swedish study circles, their continuity, and their breadth of coverage and appeal raise intriguing questions about the comparative limitations of American efforts. What are the differences in the two societies, both democratic and both accepting of the idea that an informed and educated populace is the heart of successful democracy?

One difference is that Sweden is a smaller and more unified society, with greater equality of educational and economic levels, and therefore more tolerant of dissenting views expressed in public formats, often with government subsidy. Study circles can examine any issue they want, can provide their own materials, and still receive government support for the study circle as a vehicle for adult education. In the United States, individuals may hold unpopular ideas, but government or philanthropic support for organized discussion of these ideas would be highly unlikely. Hence, the freedom of personal choice that contributes to the Swedish success would be difficult to replicate here, unless a widespread network of self-supporting study groups could be established and maintained.

Another difference between the Swedish and American experience in public policy discussion is recognition of the importance of the study circle format as an institutional form in Swedish public life. Much of the public policy issue discussion in Sweden presumably occurs under study circle auspices. In the United States, most public discussion occurs outside the framework of any formal national program. The case studies here represent only the tip of the American discussion iceberg; most study groups or public forums arise informally as the need is demonstrated or

as dedicated individuals come on the scene. These programs tend to be transient, non-institutionalized (with exceptions such as Great Decisions or the Twin Cities Area Citizens League), and dependent on interest, energy, and funding at the moment.

At the same time, the percentage of Americans taking part in even the most extensive forum efforts is miniscule compared to Sweden. In a society where half the people do not bother to vote and where only about one-third read even one book a year, the numbers willing to devote the time and energy to serious study and discussion are a small percentage of the population.

Swedish and European democracies in general stress citizen responsibilities for involvement in electoral politics, whereas the United States system has always emphasized almost equally the citizen's freedom from government, the right to pursue one's own interests and forget about broader societal concerns. Indeed, this right to indifference may be the most cherished of American liberties judging from poor voting turnouts despite the ease of the process and the media hoopla that surrounds elections. If widespread citizen indifference to public discussion of these issues helps to explain the comparatively limited appeal or duration of American popular forums, it also suggests their importance in the ongoing struggle between social responsibility and self-indulgent citizen withdrawal from the political process.

Future Public Forum Movements

Among the important implications that emerge from an examination of the seven case studies are the need for an overriding sense of mission and consistent principles, central organization, and a catalyzing force to determine the issues and design and distribute quality materials; the choosing of timely and important issues — sufficiently general to be meaningful throughout the country yet specific enough to trigger debate; the importance of local leadership and initiative, either through existing organizations or new coalitions and networks of organizations; and the development of a mechanism for passing on "results" to those in policymaking positions.

Public forum organizers should also consider their own goals in encouraging broad public participation in organized public discussion programs. Should public forums be "ends" in themselves, adult civic learning experiences encouraging concerned citizens to develop the habits, skills, competencies, and knowledge of public issues for living in a democratic society? This is essentially the philosophy behind the Studebaker and USDA forums, the AIF, and the AACJC energy program. The organizers did not have social and political change in mind in establishing their programs; what participants did with the knowledge and skills was up to them. On the other hand, citizen education programs, if viewed comprehensively, can have both individual learning goals and serve as well as instrumentalities, or "means" for citizen participation in governance, to influence public policy. This is the philosophy of the Great Decisions program, the citizens leagues, and to a limited degree, the Swedish study circles. Both education and action are important.

Harold Stubblefield, in summarizing his history of civic education in America, concludes that

> effective citizenship required more than just information and tolerance. The real test of the forum as an instrument for effective citizenship was its ability to stimulate intelligent thought which could be carried over into organizations and put into action in these organizations, for it was through organizations that public opinion made itself felt in America. Problems of government and society were not simple and could not be decided by discussion.[30]

Citizen education, through public forum movements, offers outlets for citizen advice and for citizen-government partnerships for policy formation. They are basically anti-bureaucratic, quasi-governing movements linking education in public affairs with thoughtful political action. In this context, citizens are acting as "public agents," overcoming self-interests and gaining the skills necessary for civic participation in the spirit of free exchange.

The United States has a special need for bold experiments and new policy instruments to encourage citizen participation in defining and resolving social and political issues, rather than promoting citizen compliance with government policies. Despite the privatism of American life — indeed in part because of it — there is special need for things public forums can do: sharpen citizen concern and understanding of issues, aid citizens in influencing — and sensing they influence — policy decisions, and create a sense of mutual respect and responsibility in working toward answers to our most pressing issues. In this regard, citizen education and public forums are, in Studebaker's words, "the American way," the applied art of citizenship that can enrich and help to fulfill the promises of our democratic system.

Twenty-five convening institutions in 17 states held 313 meetings in the fall of 1983, the pilot year of the Domestic Policy Association's National Issues Forum. Some 10,000 persons participated in forums similar to this one held in Cincinnati, Ohio.

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The Domestic Policy Association: Our Newest National Issues Forum

The Emergence of the DPA

Since this study was researched and written, the DPA's National Issues Forum has taken on dramatic dimensions after a brief two years of existence. If it had not been so new on the national scene, the DPA could well have become case study number 8 for this report. It combines the best and most successful elements of the public forum movements documented in this study and, even in its infancy, demonstrates some unique characteristics which serve to set the DPA program apart from the other public forum movements.

Given this study's analysis of public forum movements in our history (and the one foreign example), how can we integrate and assess the DPA in this context, even at this early stage of its development?

First, the assumptions that underlie all of these forum movements, that motivated their creators and sponsors, appear to be still with us. When Daniel Yankelovich

speaks of the ever-deepening "chasm between the American people and our major institutions of leadership," he is providing a significant rationale to encourage the development of programs to bridge this chasm. Throughout our history, recognition of this intolerable gap between citizen and policymaker — this "missing link" in American political and social life — has led enlightened idealists at various times and places to attempt to construct public discussion programs, among them the case studies in this report, to create a more informed citizenry armed with knowledge and capable of influencing public life and decision making.

Beyond the exercise of our franchise, which more than half of us don't exercise anyway in national elections, and occasional letters to public officials, where are the opportunities for citizen voices to be *systematically* heard in the corridors of power? Public hearings are often a sham, dominated by technical experts, armed with briefing books, facing down well-meaning citizens for the most part ill-prepared for highly technical arguments but still feeling strongly about a local issue. It is no wonder that neighborhood groups often have to revert to shouting and confrontational tactics just to have their views heard — yet most policymakers still seem surprised with this type of public response.

Still, we have to assume, as did the previous planners of public forum programs, going back to Holbrook's Lyceums, that citizens want their opinions heard by policymakers but are too seldom asked, and that our more enlightened policymakers not only believe in the efficacy of citizens becoming more informed and conversant with the choices before them on public issues, but also actively will support programs that seek to enhance civic literacy and bring about citizen-policymaker interconnections.

Given the validity of these assumptions, DPA's catalytic role in national-issue discussion seems to make sense in our confused domestic state — with budgetary constraints and the economic picture forcing everyone, including local, state, and federal governments, to face some difficult choices.

But how can we fit DPA into the pattern of the other case studies, the other public forum movements from Studebaker's forums to the Swedish study circles, knowing that DPA is still in a nascent but growth-oriented stage? One way may be to take the characteristics of the most successful of the forum movements, for example the three that are still around (FPA's Great Decisions, the citizens leagues, and the Swedish study circles), and determine to what extent they are incorporated into the DPA conceptual framework and working plan. Another way is to ascertain the distinct characteristics of the DPA and assess them as elements contributing to a long-term public forum program.

DPA's Similarities to Other Forum Programs

Without exhaustive analysis, DPA shows some of the following characteristics of successful forum movements: a sense of mission and principles about public life; central, catalytic organizational structure; choosing of timely and important issues

which have local manifestations; presentation of materials that are attractive and intelligible to lay publics; encouragement of local leadership and initiative, through ad hoc coalitions or existing organizational networks; and the capability of reporting the forum results and summaries to policymakers.

Further, DPA appears to have adopted the three essential goals of these forums: strict nonpartisanship, use of the forum format as a learning experience to enhance civic competency and public confidence of citizens, and perceiving the local forums as instrumental for active citizen participation and influence in public decision making.

Applying these characteristics and goals to DPA's efforts, even at this early stage, indicates that DPA falls within the mold of those public forum movements that have demonstrated unusual longevity in a history more marked by the discontinuity of such programs. If DPA can acquire its own sense of identity and legitimacy, remain flexible and adaptable to changing times, continue networking, and be on the forefront of issues and technological developments, then it could be a force in national and community life for a long time.

DPA's Distinctive Characteristics

DPA somehow differs in three important respects from some of its counterparts identified in the case studies. For example, the slowly-building, but long-term prospect of *local organizational investment*, with communities having a stake not only in their local forum programs but also identifying with the national effort, is a key concept in DPA's long-range planning.

Only in the citizens leagues, which are local to begin with, and to some degree in the World Affairs Councils established for the Great Decisions program, do we find this concept as a fundamental tenet. By starting small, by not ploughing substantial funding into local forums, and by encouraging local contributions and self-supporting community forums, DPA over time has the potential of creating a new nationwide, loose-knit network for citizen discussion of important national issues — regardless of outside funding.

An examination of the case studies shows that none employed *a distinct methodology*. They employed demonstration projects, trained moderators and discussion leaders, and provided substantial material on how to conduct a forum, but their discussion formats were primarily borrowed from standard adult education practice and small-group dynamics or simply left to local planners to devise their own approaches to audience participation. The DPA, on the other hand, claims a "DPA methodology" which has a set of principles but is still in need of more research.

Thus, the dimensions and theoretical implications of the DPA methodology are still being worked out; the resulting data-based theory will be more an amalgam of existing communications-group-dynamics and social-psychological principles than they will reflect any one existing theory borrowed from another field and applied to DPA's forums.

In its basic form the DPA methodology encompasses four steps: (1) personalizing the national issues so citizens can identify

with the choices inherent in any public issue; (2) distinguishing among the choices to permit citizen opinions to emerge with participants fully aware of the trade-offs when one choice is made over another; (3) permitting the full airing of differences of viewpoints in public forums, with encouragement to participants to move from their "first opinions" to "second" and "third opinions" based on evidence and rational argumentation; and finally, (4) providing a setting whereby forum participants can "work through" an issue to find the levels where they can agree and find some common ground to enable them to act consensually on the issue.

I am reminded here of an address by Wilson Carey McWilliams a few years ago, "The Recovery of Politics," in which he denigrated "politics" in its self-serving, power-seeking, partisan advantage sense. Politics, for McWilliams, citing Aristotle, "is the effort of human beings, in common, to obtain the good life." As citizens, we are sociologically interdependent for our livelihoods but psychologically interdependent for our sense of self-government, our *autonomia*, our ability to exercise freedom of choice on policy issues while fulfilling our community responsibilities to work for the common good. Finding "common counsel" or concord on public issues and communicating the results to policymakers help us to fulfill this responsibility.

And here is where DPA seems to have made great initial strides by building in the *citizen-policymaker linkages* from the start. Although similar in concept to the reporting efforts of Great Decisions, the citizen leagues' task forces, and the Swedish study circle ballots, DPA's strategy for reaching policymakers has already taken on some unusual dimensions. For instance, in its first year DPA shared the results of its 1982 National Issues Forum series with policymakers at the Ford Presidential Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in February, 1983, with former Presidents Ford and Carter as hosts. It will expand on the links in 1984 by sharing the 1983 forum outcomes with policymakers at a major conference at the LBJ Presidential Library in March, 1984, through teleconference "downlinks" with communities around the country, and through intensive policy briefings of national organizational leadership in Washington, D.C., in the spring.

It is in this area of policy briefings that DPA distinguishes its program as more of an activist force to influence policymaking than the other three movements which simply use opinion ballots, study group reports, or direct testimony to policymakers — overlooking the value of engaging both public- and private-sector leaders in exchanges on the issues.

This strategy, then, is the essence of seeking citizen concord on the issues — helping policymakers understand *how to govern* while helping citizens understand *how to be governed*. It could well be a test of our democratic system.

Given the historical discontinuity of public forum movements documented in this study, it is hard to be sanguine about yet another national public discussion attempt. Yet, DPA is growing, the leadership is patient and taking a long view, networks are slowly building, communities are en-

couraged to "invest" in the national program and institutionalize the forum process locally, and policymakers are starting to recognize the potential of DPA's contribution to civic interest, public dialogue, and public policy decisions that reflect informed citizen-policymaker collaboration.

Notes

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[10]*Ibid.*

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